The Copts of Egypt:
Freedom to Worship?

BAISTER/PANOS PICTURES

Egypt

The events at Biba

Biba is a town of 50,000 on the west bank of the Nile, south of Cairo. On 13 May 1989, according to residents, a fourth-year university student led an attack by Islamic extremists on the town's Coptic church while a meeting was still in progress. He hurled and then ignited flammable liquid inside the building. The ensuing blaze killed two members of the congregation, 'Atiya Arian, a 62 year-old retired teacher and 'Eid Nassif Ghally, a 40 year-old agricultural engineer. Sami Boutros, a 32 year-old council worker, survived, but sustained severe burns all over his body. The student himself was burned to death in the attack

The attack on the church generated fear among Biba's 10,000-strong Coptic Christian community and tensions remained high for almost a year. Residents said that there was talk in the mosques of avenging the death of the student who had died, and that one pharmacy and several other stores, all owned by Copts were burned down. The church was severely damaged as a result of the fire. Any repairs have to be authorized by the government. Four years later in 1993, the parishioners were still waiting.

Differences between church and mosque construction are enshrined in Egyptian law. Churches cannot be built in Egypt, or even repaired, without the written permission of the country's ruler, following an 1856 Ottoman imperial decree that remains in force. It is the only Ottoman edict that has not been abolished in Egypt. In practice, it means that Copts have to wait months, sometimes years, before they can obtain permission to carry out the most minor repairs. A priest in Upper Egypt was exasperated as he pointed at the dingy, peeling walls of his church, 'I cannot even paint the walls without the permission of [President] Hosni Mubarak!'

This singling-out of Christian places of worship has had serious consequences. Applying special rules to some, but not all, religious institutions, brings with it the inevitable stigma of unequal status, reinforcing arguments made privately by Copts that they are treated as second-class citizens. This policy also contributes to a climate of religious intolerance and renders churches prime targets at times of strained inter-communal relations.

Some Egyptian lawyers and academics have publicly criticized the nineteenth century decree as anachronistic. In 1994, Judge Said Ahmawy, a prominent Egyptian jurist, wrote, 'Many Muslims, including myself, have asked the president for this situation to be changed, deeming that the spirit of Islam encourages tolerance for non-Muslims and upholds their right to build and maintain places of worship to practice their religion... I believe Egypt and her government should re-examine the phenomenon of construction of places of worship and establish an equitable and modern law to regulate their licensing.'

Adapted from the report Egypt: The Christian Minority, *Human Rights Watch/Middle East, November 1994.*

P. GINTER/BILDERBERG/NETWORK

Short morning service at the Convent of the Virgin Mary

Who are the Copts?

The Egyptian Copts are the largest Christian community in the Middle East. Their numbers are currently estimated to be 5 million, almost 10 per cent of the Egyptian population. However, some Coptic Christian leaders dispute these figures. Based on church statistics, they estimated the number of Christians in Egypt in 1975 to be about 6.8 million, constituting 18 per cent of Egypt's population.

Before the Arab conquest of Egypt in 640 A.D., all Egyptians were known as Copts and the early Arabs called Egypt the land of the Copts.

Background and history

Christianity spread in Egypt in the middle of the first century A.D. when Egypt was part of the Roman Empire. However, the Copts were subjected to constant oppression under Roman rule even after Constantine the Great declared Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire in 312 A.D.

After the Arab conquest, Copts gradually converted to Islam and Muslims became the majority population of Egypt. Islam appealed to many as a straightforward religion with no complicated rituals. Some Copts chose to convert because of economic or political reasons, and others to avoid persecution. However, the conversion of many Copts, and the use of Arabic in government legislation, provided the basis for the Arabization of Egypt as Islam stipulates a good knowledge of Arabic. Use of the Coptic language was confined to the Church.

Sectarian strife between Copts and Muslims became particularly acute in the Memeluke era in the thirteenth century. This was an especially violent period for the Copts. They were excluded from all formal sectors of society and continued to be marginalized when Egypt became part of the Ottoman Empire in 1517 A.D.

Copts have continued to be susceptible to changes in the national political arena in the twentieth century,

even after Egypt gained its independence from Britain in 1919. The reforms of President Nasser in the 1960s led many Copts to feel uneasy about their future status in the country. A major Coptic migration from Egypt began to the West and Australia. They maintained links with the Church in Egypt by forming many Coptic Orthodox churches abroad.

The height of the conflict, 1971-81

President Sadat called himself 'the believer president', emphasizing his Islamic religious piety. The years 1971-81 brought new and serious changes on the social, economic and political scene. In 1972, there was an upsurge of militant Islamic groups. The road to sectarian strife was clearly paved.

Continuous attacks on the Copts began. Islamic groups started attacking Coptic churches, monasteries, and shops owned by Copts. Coptic students at universities were harassed and some young girls were kidnapped and forced to marry Muslims.

On 4 August 1981, President Sadat went to visit the United States. During his visit, Coptic organizations published a paid advertisement in *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* expressing outrage at the treatment of the Copts in Egypt and organized demonstrations in front of the White House against Sadat. Domestic opposition against him was also mounting from several liberal and leftist quarters. When Sadat returned to Egypt, he lashed out at all his detractors, Muslim and Copt alike. In particular, Sadat cancelled the presidential decree of 1971 that stipulated the appointment of the Coptic Pope Shenouda. The Pope was placed under house arrest in his monastery in Natroun Valley. Furthermore, Sadat formed a committee of five bishops to handle all papal duties, accusing the Pope of conspiracy. Some 1,500 Copts were arrested and jailed with no specific charge, other than the vague justification that it was to protect 'national unity'.

In 1973, clerics from Al Azhar, the ancient Islamic university in Cairo, presented a draft law to parliament, calling for the execution of apostates and enforcing Islamic penal codes, or *sharia* to non-Muslims. This proposal intensified Coptic feelings of instability and anxiety.

Copts today

Sadat was assassinated in 1981 by a militant Islamic group called Jihad. President Mubarak's era began with an attempt at pacifying the Copts, which resulted in 1985 with the Pope's release from house arrest. However, by the late 1980s, general social unrest again led to an increase in violence against the Copts. The year 1992 was particularly violent, with 22 Copts murdered and 285 injured. In a country of 60 million, these figures may not seem high, particularly when compared to sectarian strife elsewhere in the world, but for Egypt, these figures are unprecedented in modern history.

Although violence against Copts has decreased since 1992, the situation is still tense. Islamic militants

BOLESLAW EDELHAJT / FRANK SPOONER PICTURES

Coptic procession in Dronka

still pose a serious threat to state and society, their assassination attempt on President Mubarak on 26 June 1995, being a dramatic case in point.

For centuries, Egyptian Copts have been socially, economically and culturally integrated. A foreign observer would hardly be able to detect any difference between the Coptic minority and the Muslim majority in looks, manners, and values. Nevertheless, the political integration of the Copts is less than a century old, and has at times deteriorated to mere tokenism. While the Copts may have their equitable share of wealth, education, and professional prestige, their share of power has plummeted.

Equitable power-sharing, however, has not been the Copts' major concern in recent decades. They have been more concerned about social stability. Historically, whenever Egypt experiences social strains, the Copts pay a disproportionate price. The rise of Islamic militant groups, itself a reaction to mounting societal strain, has made the Copts of Egypt more of a scapegoat than ever. Yet the fate of the Copts is inseparable from that of Egypt. A stable, prosperous and democratic Egypt holds the greatest promise for the Copts, while discrimination and marginalization could lead to serious inter-communal conflict.

ISSUES FOR ACTION

1. **Freedom to worship** The Ministerial Decree of 1936 which imposes limitations on church-building should be abolished, and a new law issued which gives equality to all citizens regarding the building of churches and mosques. Copts should be free to practice their religion.

2. **Education** Education, especially in primary and secondary schools, should stress tolerance and anti-discriminatory concepts. The Coptic history should be included and studied by children in the curricula along with the Pharaonic and Greco-Roman periods.

3. **Employment** There should be a fair representation of Copts in all governmental positions including the key decision-making posts. Those who discriminate against Christians should be punished.

4. **The media** Action to stop attacks on the Christian religion in the media has been successful. People who incite hatred against Copts should be brought to justice.

5. **Women** The unification of the personal status laws (i.e. the state and Christian ones) would improve women's position. Further, the government should apply the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women without its reservations, and more women should be encouraged into leadership of the Church.

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